



Grief in Children

SUSANNA CHAN

Social Work Officer (Palliative Care)

Hong Kong Children's Hospital

 How do children react when they are facing their own death? What do the sick kids need psychosocially? How to talk with children about death and dying? Grief of family members

How Do Children React When They are Facing Their Own Death

- Infant

- Infants have no concept about death.
- BUT they do react to the separation from parents, painful procedures, change of their daily routine....etc.
- They feel tremendous discomfort if there is a sudden change in their daily life.
- Infants cannot tell us about their need.
- BUT they can express their fear and discomfort by crying.

How Do Children React When They are Facing Their Own Death

- Toddler

- Toddlers have a little concept about death.
- BUT they may feel anxious and afraid because those around them are sad, depressed, scared, or angry.
- Toddlers may not understand the terms "death" or "forever" or "permanent."
- For them, death is not a permanent condition. Instead, death is seen as reversible for this age group.

How Do Children React When They are Facing Their Own Death

- Preschooler
 - Preschoolers may sense that adult fears death.
 - They may get some concepts about death from cartoon or TV games, which is temporary or reversible.
 - They may realize that dead thing doesn't eat, sleep, talk or breathe. Some of them may be told that the dead went to Heaven.
 - They are curious about "how" and "why" death happens.
 - They may think suffering from terminal illness is punishment for something they did or thought about (magical thinking).

How Do Children React When They are Facing Their Own Death

- School-aged child
 - School-aged children have a more realistic understanding of death. They are starting to view death as permanent.
 - They may be very curious about the physical process of death and what happens after a person dies.
 - Fear of the unknown, loss of control, and separation from family and friends can be the school-aged child's main sources of anxiety and fear related to death.
 - Some of them may put their anger to their parents as they thought that their parents could not protect them from pain and sufferings.

How Do Children React When They are Facing Their Own Death

- Teenager

- Most teens understand that death is permanent, and that everyone dies. Some of them may have experienced the death of family members, friends or pets
- Most teens are starting to establish their identity, independence, and relation to peers. When they are facing their own death, they may feel that they no longer belong or fit in with their peers. They may also feel that they are unable to communicate with their parents
- Self-image is important to teens. A terminal illness or the effects of treatment may cause many physical changes that they must endure. Teens may feel alone in their struggle, and scared, and angry.

What do the sick kids need psychosocially?

- Being treated as normal kids (age-appropriate)
- Space for kids to express their feelings
- Sense of independence and control (especially for teenagers)
- Spiritual needs
- Wish fulfillment
- Being sick is not their fault
- Reassurance of not being alone

➤ ***Love, respect, and dignity are all important factors in caring for sick kids***

How to talk with children about death and dying?

- Why talking with children about death and dying is difficult for us?
 - We avoid talking about things that upset us.
 - We feel uncomfortable when we don't have all the answers.
 - Death is often a taboo subject, especially in Chinese culture.
 - We don't know how to discuss death and dying in children's language.

How to talk with children about death and dying?

- Do's

- ✓ Tell the truth about what happened right away.
- ✓ Be prepared for a variety of emotional responses.
- ✓ Make sure to use the words dead or died.
- ✓ Share information in doses.
- ✓ Be comfortable saying, "I don't know."
- ✓ Cry.
- ✓ Let the children grieve in their own way.
- ✓ Prepare to talk about thoughts and feelings often.
- ✓ Remember to take care of yourself.

How to talk with children about death and dying?

- Do's (for the siblings/friends of the sick kids)
 - ✓ Allow children to participate in rituals.
 - ✓ Prepare children for what they will see in the funeral home or service.
 - ✓ Prepare children for the future without their loved one.

How to talk with children about death and dying?

- Don'ts

- ✘ Don't hide your grief from children.

- ✘ Don't avoid connecting with children because you feel helpless or uncomfortable, or don't know what to say.

- ✘ Don't change the subject when children come into the room.

- ✘ Don't think that death puts a ban on laughter.

How to talk with children about death and dying?

- Don'ts (for the siblings/friends of the sick kids)
 - ✘ Don't be afraid to share memories of their loved one.
 - ✘ Don't change their daily routine as well as yours.
 - ✘ Don't put a time limit on the children's bereavement – or your own.

Grief of Family Members

Grief isn't something you get over;
It's something you go through.

Alan Pedersen

Grief of Family Members

- Parents
- Siblings
- Grandparents and closed relatives
- Formal carers

Grief of Family Members

- Parents





Grief of Family Members

- Parents
 - Parental loss is the worst possible grief. It might be a lifetime journey.
 - Children is a symbol of future. Losing a child represents a loss of future, hopes and dreams.
 - Common responses to a child's death: shock, denial, yearning, confusion, guilt, powerlessness, emptiness, anger, loss of hope.....
 - Even both mothers and fathers grieve deeply, they grieve differently.
 - Marriage might be affected.

Grief of Family Members

- Parents
 - Bereaved parents must be allowed to mourn in his/her own way and time frame.
 - Others may minimize or misunderstand the grief of the bereaved parents. It is not because of their ignorance but helplessness.
 - Emotions of the bereaved parents might be triggered by some special occasions, such as birthdays, holidays, anniversary of the child's death, Father's/Mother's Day...etc.
 - Rituals/Spiritual support may help bereaved parents.
 - Continuing bond/maintaining the "role of parents" is important for bereaved parents.

Grief of Family Members

- How can we help the bereaved parent? (Do's)
 - ✓ Acknowledge the child's death by telling the parents of your sadness for them and by love and support
 - ✓ Visit and talk with the family about the child who died
 - ✓ Attend the child's funeral
 - ✓ Remember the child's special days
 - ✓ Respect the dynamic of each person's grief

Grief of Family Members

- How can we help the bereaved parent? (Don'ts)
 - ✗ Don't avoid the parents or the grief
 - ✗ Don't impose our views or feelings on the parents
 - ✗ Don't wait for the parents to ask for help
 - ✗ Don't tell them you know just how they feel
 - ✗ Don't be afraid to let the parents cry

Grief of Family Members

“There is a need to talk, without trying to give reasons. No reasons is going to be acceptable when you hurt so much. A hug, the touch of a hand, expression of concern, a willing listener where and still are the things that have helped the most...

The people who were the greatest help...were not judgmental. It's most helpful when people understand that what is needed is to talk about it and that is part of the grief process. “

(DeFrain et al. 1991)

Grief of Family Members

- Siblings

Video – 來不及說再見

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6V3U62QpNY&t=19s>

Grief of Family Members

- Siblings - Young children
 - Death of a siblings can be a very confusing experience.
 - Siblings are an important part of a child's world. Surviving siblings may experience intense sadness/grief, crying, not wanting to spend time with friends/classmates, loss of appetite, sleep difficulties, decline in academic performance, guilt, searching for the deceased sibling or ask questions about what had happened to him/her.
 - Like adults, they may experience "pangs" of grief; Unlike adults, they may display these behaviors more intermittently.

Grief of Family Members

- Siblings - Young children
 - If parents are unable to deal with the child's grief, encourage them to ask for support of a trusted relative to be with them.
 - Always be honest with a child about what is happening. Give them information and knowledge which is appropriate for their age and understanding.
 - Don't download adult commentary on the child that is burdensome on him/her.
 - Be prepared for rapid changes in mood and behaviors.
 - Make sure that it is possible for children to take part in their normal activities and also give them emotional support.

Grief of Family Members

- Siblings - Teenagers
 - Developmental task of teenagers: identity.
 - Losing a sibling may have an impact on their view of themselves and their world.
 - They can feel a sense of being left out or their grief is unrecognized. They can also feel a sense of guilt as they failed to protect their siblings.
 - They may take up the responsibility to take care of their parents' wellbeing and thus they remain at home to look after their parents. However, some of them need for a space and time away from the family.

Grief of Family Members

- Siblings - Teenagers
 - Include them in family discussion/support.
 - Don't assume that they are strong because they don't air out their feelings.
 - Don't assume that they don't care when they "disappear" from the family.
 - Address their feelings and relationship with the deceased siblings.
 - Be aware that direct attempt to enquire into their feelings may be rebuffed. Leaving a space and creating activities where conversations can begin and feelings may be shared can see them raise discussions on what they are feeling.

Grief of Family Members

- Grandparents and closed relatives
 - The forgotten grievers

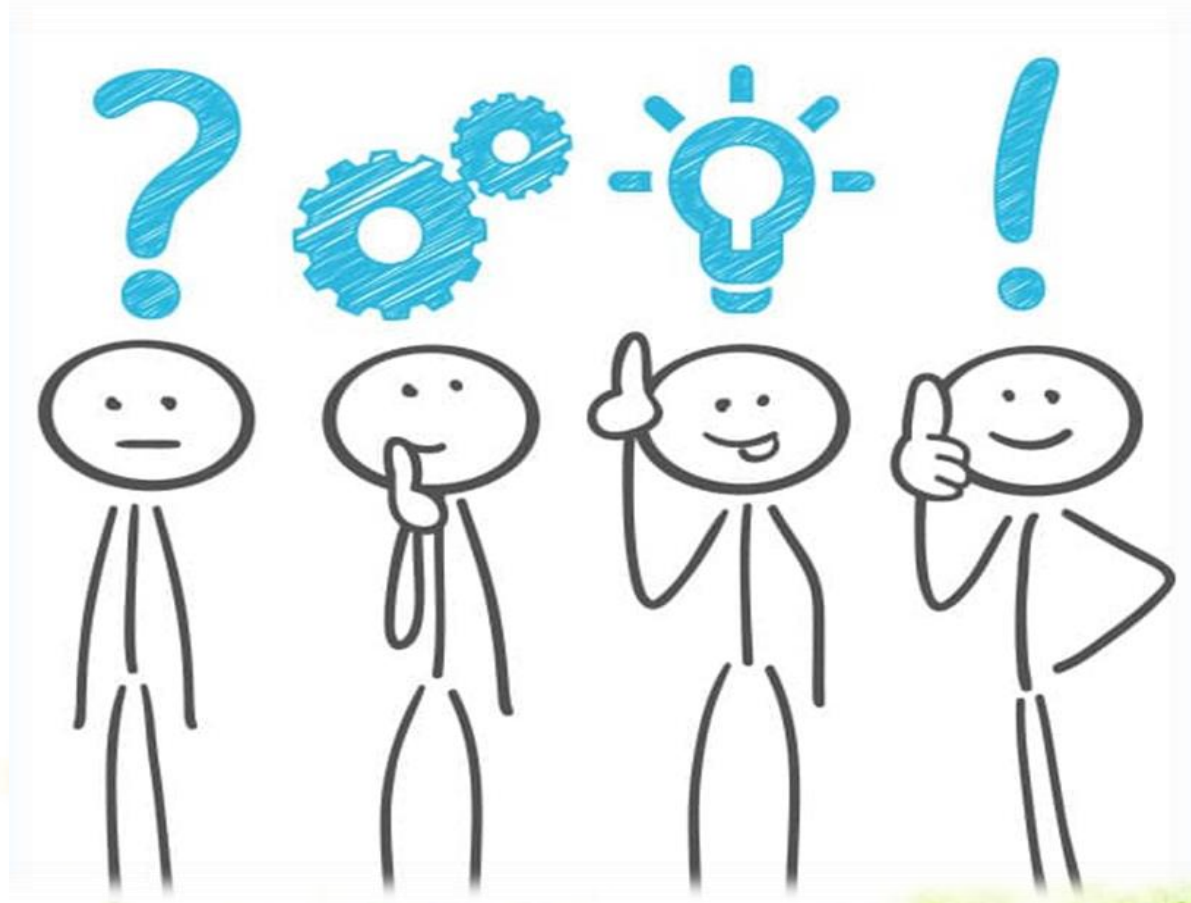
Grief of Formal Carers

- Domestic helpers
- School teachers
- Medical staff

Reference

1. Arnold, J. H., Gemma, P. B. (1983). *A Child Die: A Portrait of Family Grief*. Rockville, MD: Aspen Systems Corporation.
2. Broderick, P. C., Blewitt, P (2014). *The Life Span: Human Development for Helping Professionals. (4th ed.)*. Pearson Education, Inc.
3. Davies, R (2003). New Understandings of Parental Grief: Literature Review. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 46(5), 506-513.
4. DeFrain, J. (1991). Learning about Grief from Normal Families: SIDS, Stillbirth, and Miscarriage. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 17(3), 215-232.
5. Dyregrov, A. (1990). *Grief in Children: A Handbook for Adults*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
6. Field, M. J., Behrman, R.E. (2003). *When Children Die: Improving Palliative and End-of-life Care for Children and Their Families*. Washington (DC): National Academics Press.
7. Fitzgerald, H. (1992). *The Grieving Child*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
8. Rando, T. A (Ed.) (1986). *Parental Loss of a Child*. Champaign, IL: Research Press Company.
9. Worden, J. W. (2002). *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.

Question and Answer



Thank You



email: csc431@ha.org.hk